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Ephesians 2 and Peace in the Middle East

Ephesians 2:13-18

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Last week I showed you how the Scripture understands the blood of Christ as the means by which both Jew and Gentile gain the benefits of the grace of God. Despite the advantages of the Jew, the benefit of knowing a personal and loving God and being known by Him, the Jewish people still persisted in sin. The pagan Gentiles, not aware of God, also persisted in sin. Through the blood of Christ, both could come into God's presence and find salvation.

In Romans 3, Paul uses rabbinical method to string together a series of quotations from what we call the Old Testament (to him the Scriptures) to make this same point, that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. One of the quotes he uses is from Isaiah 59, in which he says 'the way of peace they do not know.' And how true that is today as we look at the violence and hatred in the Middle East, and specifically between the Palestinians and the Jews.

I believe the solution to the conflict in the Middle East has to do with an understanding of conflict and peace. Clearly, people have been thinking about this for decades, and you might wonder why I think I have the solution.

The central problem is that people don't understand what brings conflict and, therefore, what brings peace. We can see this at the individual level, within the family circle, in a church, in a company, in a state, in a nation, and among the nations of the world. It's always the same problem - men and women don't know the way of peace.

Jesus was able to bridge the chasm between Jew and Gentile, though it took his blood to get there. The passage from Ephesians 2 for today describes how Christ actually does it.

Paul starts with the key to peace - 'He is our peace, who has made us both one.' Paul starts with a definition of what true peace really is. True peace is oneness. It's not merely a cessation of hostility, the absence of conflict - it means being one. This is very important to get. Otherwise, when you talk about peace, you are only being superficial. Is it peace when the Palestinians and Jews lay down their weapons and stop fighting each other? Well, we call it that. And certainly it's to be preferred over armed conflict. But it's not really peace - not according to God's definition. Is it peace when a husband and wife agree not to get a divorce but to stay together, perhaps for the sake of the children, but that home continues in coldness and divisiveness, with no harmony or joy? Well, it may be peace according to the world's definition, but it isn't according to God's. Is it peace when two friends who haven't spoken to each other for some time finally decide to agree to disagree, to speak civilly to each other, but they don't seek each other's company any more? Not according to God's definition.

You see, peace is harmony, oneness. It's sharing mutual enjoyment. It's being one. Anything else is superficial and temporary and highly unsatisfactory. You know what I mean, don't you? You have made peace on superficial terms, and have found it only external.

If you merely agree not to fight, it's not peace. And invariably it results, sooner or later, in a new outbreak, with all the previous animosity surging to the surface once again. It's only temporary, and never very satisfying. This is why what we call peace among nations never lasts - because it isn't really peace. It isn't oneness at all. It's only a weariness with warfare, and agreement to stop it awhile until we can all recuperate and rearm. Then it breaks out all over again, because nothing is ever settled. God isn't interested in that.

But here, in our passage today, Paul tells us the secret of peace. The secret of oneness is a Person: "He is our peace." And when Christ Jesus makes peace - between individuals or between nations - that peace will be a satisfying, permanent, and genuine peace. It will be a real peace that will last and last. And it will be a totally satisfying experience. What Paul is saying is that in order to live at peace, you must have peace. The problem with most of us is that we want to start by clearing up only the results of conflict. God never starts there - He starts with the person. He says peace is in Jesus Christ, and in order for you to live at peace with someone else, you must be at peace with the Person of Christ. If you have His peace, then you can start solving that conflict around you. But you can never do it on any other basis. So the place to start, the origin of peace, is the settling of any problems between you and Christ. That's always the place to start.

People continue to come into my office - or go to others in the congregation - with various problems involving conflict. Usually they are upset, troubled, discouraged, angry. They report to me at great length all the terrible things the other person has done, and all the reasons why they are justified in being so angry, and feeling so mistreated. I have listened to it all for years, but until I looked carefully at this passage from Ephesians 2, I tended to try to do peace-making the world's way, by adjudicating between sides, by declaring which side was more reasonable. That's the way people are trying to solve the conflict in the Middle East, or the conflict in Ireland, or the conflicts in Africa. Everyone wants to feel justified in their anger, and have someone agree how mistreated they have been.

What Paul says here is that this person who comes to the pastor with justified anger and discontent has two problems. There is the presenting problem of how they have been wronged, but there is also the other problem, the one they must start with, the one they don't want to hear about. That problem is that they don't have any peace themselves. They are not at peace. They are upset, angry, emotionally distraught, and everything they do and think is colored by that emotional state. They can't see anything straight, and they don't see things in balance, and their perspective is distorted in lots of ways, and everything (not just the presenting issue) is out of focus. And so what I might now say to them is that it's impossible to solve the problem until they themselves acquire peace.

So, Paul tells his Christian readers, Christ is our peace. This is likely the most significant area of growth and maturity for all Christians, regardless how long you have known Jesus. Because once your attitude is changed, once your heart is settled, once you have put the matter into the hands of the Lord, and you see that He is active in it, that He has a solution, and your own heart therefore comes to peace, then you can begin to understand what is happening and can apply some intelligent remedies to the situation which will work out the problem.

You see, when Paul declares that Christ is our peace, he is saying that Christ alone can accomplish peace, and Jesus does this by making us one. How does he do this? It comes in three stages - three things must happen before you really have oneness.

First, this passage says "he has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations." I remind you that Paul is talking about the ending of the great conflict between Jews and Gentiles of

his day. He says the first thing Jesus did was to break down the 'dividing wall of hostility.' Specifically, Paul is referring to a feature in the temple in Jerusalem. He was a Jew and had been brought up there. He understood the temple - he had been there many times. And he remembered the wall, about 3-4 feet high, which ran through the court of the temple, dividing it into two sections, separating the court of the Gentiles, where the Gentiles were permitted to come, from the inner court, into which only Jews were permitted. There was a sign which warned anyone who wasn't a Jew that if they dared to venture into this inner court, they did so on pain of death.

In fact, in 1871 archeologists were digging around the temple site in Jerusalem, and uncovered the very stone marked with this warning. These were the actual words, translated from both the Hebrew and the Greek: "No man of another race is to proceed within the partition and enclosing wall about the sanctuary. Any one arrested there will have himself to blame for the penalty of death which will be imposed as a consequence." Whew!

So, this 3-4 foot high wall was a symbol. But Paul says the hostility it represented was demolished in Jesus Christ. At best, the Jews treated the Gentiles with aloofness; at worst, they despised and hated them. There was enormous hostility between the two peoples. Then … and today.

How many of you ever had the opportunity to walk along the Berlin Wall in its heyday? From what I've read, one could feel the built-in suspicion and mutual distrust, the hatred and hostility, as one walked it. When bodies of East Germans fell, the West Germans would erect crosses upon which they placed wreaths as a reminder - in open defiance of the East German guards. The wall itself radiated intense suspicion and hostility into the surrounding neighborhoods. And into people.

There are walls like that among us. There are walls in homes like that. There is hostility and hatred and defiance and suspicion and distrust between husbands and wives, between parents and children, and between neighbors and friends. These walls of hostility arise - they are what most of us run up against. We feel the hostility, the anger, the deep-seated resentment and bitterness, and we say, "It's no use; there's nothing we can do." But Paul says that Jesus Christ knows how to remove these walls. Do you want to know how Jesus removes these walls? Then don't miss next week.

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